

THE MAN'S mess up. It's come down in different ways through the story. Some part of it is a punch to the face and some like a whisper, but all saying the same thing: *We'll do it my way now.* Forget the ghosts of Larry Coker and Jim Kick, forget that perfect season, forget anything that smacks of the past, because history is for professors and for that other guy—what was his name again?—who in the end spent so much energy worrying about his legacy that he didn't have gas enough for a playoff drive. Don Shula's way was the prudent, political way. He uttered paragraphs designed to say nothing, to tee off no one, to diplomatically hint that, *er, of course I'd like to win the Super Bowl one more time.* But Jimmy Johnson? Ever since he completed his coup in January and took over the Miami Dolphins as coach and general manager, ever since he finally arrived where "deep down I always wanted to be," the man has been dropping bombs large and small.

In March, after losing his three best defensive players—linebacker Bryan Cox, defensive end Marco Coleman and cornerback Troy Vincent—to free agency, Johnson hopped onto his yacht and cruised 130 miles north to the NFL owners' meetings in Palm Beach, where he blithely announced that his is "the team to beat" and insisted a Dallas writer put *that* in his story so Jerry Jones and Troy and Emmitt and the rest of the Boys would be sure to see it. In April he stood up at the Dolphins' annual awards banquet, a perfect place for the new coach to make nice about the team's storied tradition and Shula's legacy and all, and dumped those things down the sewer.

"I'm supposed to say congratulations to all the people in the past, to all the great tradition, to all the people who laid the groundwork," Johnson said to a room filled with longtime fans, players and staff. Then he lifted his hand and dismissed all that with a pained wave. "But I only care about one thing: the present. The people who are here now to win now." The place vibrated with applause. It was clear that nothing would ever be the same in Dolphinland. *We'll do it my way now.*

"I guess the courtesy thing would be to congratulate them for performance in past years," Johnson said a few days later. "But I wasn't in the mood to pass out courtesies."

He said this easily, while sitting at his desk, cleaning his fingernails with a stiletto-like letter opener. Johnson is comfortable being the man from whom people want courtesies. The only other coach who had occupied this office at the Dolphins training complex in Davie was Shula, who, in the words of assistant coach Larry Seiple, spent plenty of time in it poring over newspapers from around the country, "for crying out loud, to find out what they were saying about him." There's no sign of out-of-town papers in the place now. The most prominent thing is the Super Bowl trophy over Johnson's right shoulder, a replica of one of the two he won in Dallas. He doesn't give himself much time to collect number three. "I came here to do one thing: win another one," Johnson says. "And on the clock in my head, I'm looking at three years."

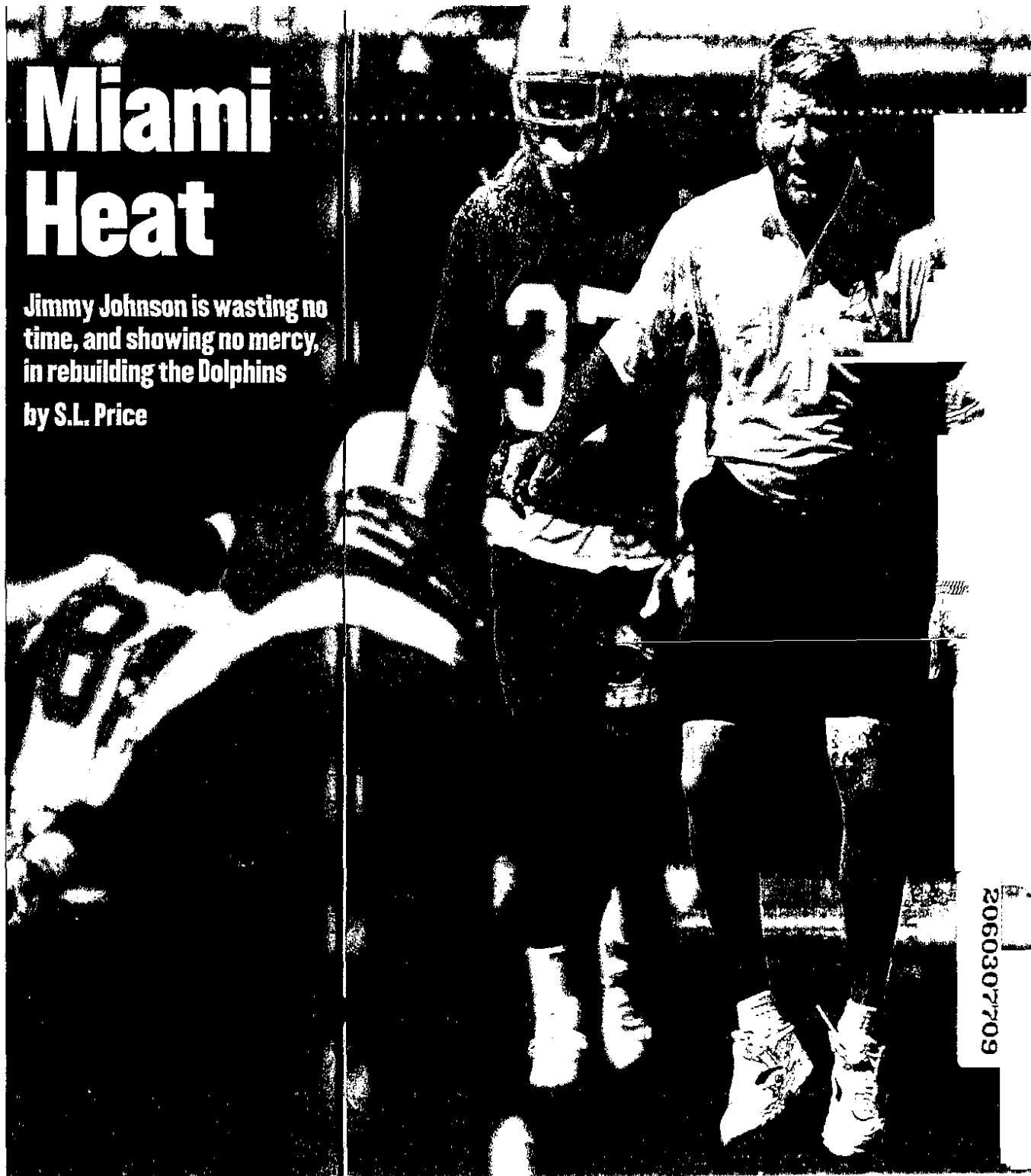
With that kind of timetable, it's no wonder it already feels as if it were September in Davie, with Johnson instilling fever and fear in an abundantly talented team that last season lacked both, finished 9-7 and then was embarrassed 37-22 by the Buffalo Bills in the first round of the playoffs. In his first team meeting, the day after his hiring was announced, Johnson immediately made it clear

Even after a two-year coaching hiatus, Johnson proved to be in midseason form at his first minicamp with the Dolphins.

Miami Heat

Jimmy Johnson is wasting no time, and showing no mercy, in rebuilding the Dolphins

by S.L. Price



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to the players that they would be the best-conditioned and toughest in the NFL—or else. (He also scolded two players who arrived late, saying if they were tardy for another meeting, he would be through with them.) As a result, more than 50 Dolphins, the largest group in team history, took part in the off-season conditioning program. All 84 players who attended last week's minicamp were in their seats 10 minutes before Johnson's first team meeting. Then, in his first on-field contact with the players, Johnson cantered about in the scorching heat, his hair stiff in plastic perfection but his 52-year-old body on the move: tugging on the jersey of running back Irving Spikes as he ran sprints, drifting along the offensive line, darting between tackle and guard and then covering wide receiver O.J. McDuffie. "That's right!" he yelled. "Let's go! Let's go!" For a team used to seeing Shula standing on the practice sidelines, jaw a-jut, as remote as an Easter Island monument, it was like watching some kid cavorting in church.

"He's out there, covering receivers, running routes," says safety Louis Oliver. "With the rookies he was running gassers. He's everywhere."

"There's a total difference," says Seiple, who spent 16 years under Shula as a player and a coach. "Last year Coach Shula was hard on the players, but he also was a little laid-back; he wasn't as strong as when he first came in 1970. There just wasn't the same spark. Jimmy is a very hyper coach, active in all parts of the game, being on the field, talking to the players, fooling around. Enthusiasm, that's the biggest thing."

No, the biggest thing was the extraordinary sight of quarterback Dan Marino, a veteran of eight operations on his legs, lumbering like a crippled bear after practice last week in a series of what may well have been the slowest wind sprints in the history of the NFL. "When's the last time you saw Dan run?" Seiple says. "He hasn't run since his rookie year."

In the most intriguing coach-player pairing since Bill Walsh teamed with Joe Montana, the meticulous and openly egotistical Johnson finds his fate entwined with that of history's greatest passer, an aging superstar given to sideline ranting, but also a South Florida institution. In Johnson, Marino gets a coach who values his record-

shattering talents and knows he needs the quarterback to get what he wants. "Our best chance is to win it with Marino," Johnson says. "He can put us over the top."

Johnson first heard about Marino in the late '70s, while he was an assistant at Pitt, where Marino attended football camps as a high school quarterback. The only time



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the two met in a game came in 1989, during Johnson's woeful 1-15 inaugural season in Dallas. Just before halftime the Cowboys sacked Marino, and time seemed to run out. But the referee—"my old buddy Jerry Markbreit," Marino says with a laugh—asked if Marino had wanted to call timeout. "If it had been any other quarterback, they wouldn't have put those seconds back,"

Johnson says. On the next play Marino tossed the usual miracle touchdown pass. Miami went on to win 17-14.

However, while Johnson respects Marino's talent, he is isn't awed by it. Unlike Shula, whose depth chart at times seemed arranged as much by salary as by accomplishment, Johnson has a history of disregarding star power when game time rolls around. Marino had a typically excellent season in 1995—3,668 yards passing, 24 touchdowns, a 90.8 quarterback rating—but he turns 35 in September. The Shula regime discussed a six-year deal with Marino, whose contract was to expire after the 1996 season, but Johnson wanted none of that. He figures Marino is capable of only a few more years at a high level before the decline begins. He is also wary of long-term deals because of the adverse effect they can have on a team's management of the salary cap. So last month, Johnson signed his future Hall of Famer for only three years (at \$5.91 million per) with the message as clear as water: Nobody, not even Marino, slides by on reputation.

"That's part of football, and that's what makes it great: the competition," Marino says. "Even though I've proven myself, now I've got to prove myself again to another coach. I look forward to that challenge."

Not that Johnson is fool enough to treat Marino like an ordinary player. When the two sat down for the first time in January, Johnson took pains to explain himself, his system. He spelled out how he wanted to take the focus of the offense off Marino by running the ball more, how that could add years to his career. He and Marino will have these talks often. He needs his quarterback on board. "I can't have him questioning the way we do things," Johnson says. "He almost has to have blind loyalty."

Marino wants only one thing in return: a championship. "I'm excited about playing for him," Marino says. "I've had a chance to play 13 years in the league, and I've set a lot of records.

I've had a great career. But I haven't won a Super Bowl." Marino told Johnson he didn't care if he threw only 10 passes a game, as long as the Dolphins won. Johnson told him of his three-year plan for pinning the NFL under his heel again. "That's what I wanted to hear," Marino says.

What Marino liked even better was that Johnson wasn't dressing up his own hunger

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